FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

That the World May Believe
October 1, 2000
John M. Buchanan

"Being engrafted into the church is no ordinary admissions process. Baptism is not a chummy bonding with those with whom we would naturally gather in clubs . . . baptism accomplishes what other initiations do not. It joins us in Christ to those with whom we have few if any interests, background, characteristics, preferences or opinions in common. It breaks down the barriers that divide, making people who can't stand each other fellow citizens of the same household of God because he died for us—and for all of them."

Barbara Wheeler

"Here's the rub. Our union and communion with God in Christ brings with it union and communion with all the others who are themselves in Christ We are one with each other because all of us are one with Christ."

P. Mark Achtemeier
The Church and Its Unity

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Ephesians 4:1-4 (NRSV)
John 17: 11, 20, 21(NRSV)

"I, therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling . . . making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."
Ephesians 4: 1, 3 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. And open our hearts to your word, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In 1996 it was my privilege to visit the Reformed Church of Croatia on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). While there I became aware of a fine young Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf who now teaches at Yale. Volf is the author of a number of books everybody is reading.

After a recent lecture on reconciliation and peace, he was asked a question: "Your description of reconciliation was eloquent, but, Professor Volf, can you love a Cetnik?" He recalls: "It was the winter of 1993. For months the notorious Serbian fighters called "cetniks" had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a "cetnik"—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? It took me a while to answer, although I immediately knew what I wanted to say—'No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to."

The book which follows is a product of Volf's struggle with this elemental and very human dilemma: the confrontation between a religion of reconciliation and the reality of racial, ethnic and religious hatred and violence.

Among the more distressing realities of life at the beginning of a new millennium is the persistence, and even the renewal of racial, ethnic and religious hatred—on every continent, it seems. Just this week tragic violence broke out again on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem—a spot held sacred by Jews and Muslims.

***Los Angeles Times* writer Robin Wright observes:**

"Of all features of the post-Cold War world, the most

consistently troubling are turning out to be tribal hatreds that divide human kind by race, faith and nationality . . .
containing the abuses committed in the name of ethnic or religious groups will be our foremost challenge for years to come." (See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* p.15)

Decades ago—in the aftermath of the Second World War—with Europe and Japan in ruins, and the human race staggering, almost stunned by its capacity for violence and destruction—London, Dresden, Coventry, Berlin, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Auchwitz, Buchenwald—the Protestant churches—with a strong presence in all those cities and nations—the largest concentration of Japanese Christians, for instance, lived in Nagasaki and perished on August 9, 1945—the churches got together and tried to find a way to speak a prophetic and healing word: a word that would affirm the oneness of the human race, the precious gift of every human life, and also a word which might translate religious beliefs into the politics of peace. And the idea they came up with, which was actually tried after the First World War, was not a political action movement but a day on which the world's Christian would acknowledge and celebrate their oneness at the Lord's Table in the sacrament of communion. It is, I have always thought, one of our better ideas—that on the first Sunday of October—Christians all around the world join hands across barriers of race and nationality. And then, in the name of their common Lord and common faith, so something which the originators of this idea did not include but which, I believe, is absolutely critical today—reach across the divide of religion to join hands with people of other faith commitments.

It is one of my favorite Sundays and I call up memories of brothers and sisters of different nationalities and races I have been privileged to know and with whom I share the communion of Jesus Christ.

Catholic theologian Hans Küng observes: "The most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired and legitimized by religion . . . There will be no peace among the peoples of the world without peace among religions. There will be no peace among world religions without peace among Christian churches." (*Christianity and World Religions,* p.442-443)

Sometimes it seems that on that score, we are regressing. A few weeks ago, to the chagrin of Catholics and Protestants alike, the Vatican took a giant step backward into the 19th century. After decades of interfaith conversations and ecumenical cooperation—after a nearly miraculous softening of relationships and a remarkable degree of openness which saw Catholics and Protestants worshipping together, serving together, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect for the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, announced to the world that there is only one true church and the Church of Rome is it, and this isn't. The Cardinal also warned Catholic Bishops against referring to us as "sister churches," and Catholic theologians about getting too chummy with religions other than Catholic theology defined by Rome.

That giant step into the past will not, thanks be to God, change the new situation between Catholics and Protestants—between this church and our brothers and sisters at Holy Name Cathedral because, by God's good grace, we have all made an amazing discovery in the past 30 years—we are one in Christ. There is a unity given to us by what Jesus Christ did for us that cannot be diminished by anyone, any church body, bureaucrat or official.

And there is no reason for self-righteousness among Protestants. In each of our denominations—Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Southern Baptist, there are increasingly strident and influential voices who, simply changing the nouns, sound a lot like Cardinal Ratzizer.

So let's go back—not to the divisiveness and hostility and violence of our past—but all the way back to that very night when Jesus gathered his friends around a table and washed their feet and gave them the bread and the cup.

It was the last night of his earthly life. They were in an upper room, preparing to celebrate Passover. It would be their last supper. Later that evening he would be betrayed by one of them, arrested by Temple guards, put on trial and the next day the Roman governor would sentence him to death and the soldiers would crucify him. And one of the last things he said was about their love for one another and their unity in his love.

"Love one another—as I have loved you. By this the world will know that you are my disciples—if you have love for one another."

And then he prayed for them that they may all be one . . . that the world may believe.

Two decades later, his disciple, Paul, would pick up the strain. "I beg you," he wrote to Christians who were already starting to argue and fight and exclude and excommunicate one another, "I beg you, make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

Princeton's Beverly Gaventa says "We're not talking about feel good unity—the more we get together and share our stories, the better we'll feel-unity." In fact, I've been part of enough of those well-intentioned efforts to have discovered that when you really get to know some people you discover that you like them even less.

We're not talking about feel-good unity. We're talking about a unity purchased at a price and then given to us by Jesus Christ. I love the way Auburn Seminary President Barbara Wheeler puts it.

> "The peace of Christ is not a sentimental blanket in which we hide and smother our differences. It is a genuine reconciliation." We are joined in Christ, Wheeler says, with those with whom we have little in common. The love of God in Jesus Christ "breaks down the barriers that divide, making people who can't stand each other

fellow citizens and members of the same household of God—because Christ died for us and for all of them." (*The Church and Its Unity,* p.13-15)

Sometimes that precious reconciliation, that new reality does break through in mysterious ways.

Bob and Dalia Baker are members of this congregation who pulled up stakes a year and a half ago and went to Albania as Presbyterian mission workers in the midst of the Kosovo crisis. Albania, during the Cold War, was a more closed society and more hostile to the West and to Christianity than any other European communist nation. When the regime fell there were almost no visible churches, although the majority of Albanians were—and are—nominal Muslims With the eruption of war in neighboring Kosovo and the flood of refugees, Christian mission workers arrived to help, Bob, a lawyer, Dalia, a teacher, among them.

Let me read a portion of Bob's August e-mail.

"I am not sure what most people expect in retirement. Early Monday morning I got a call from one of the Baptist missionaries from a city about 100 miles east of Tirana. She said that one of the Evangelical missionaries had been driving Sunday afternoon and had a traffic accident in which a nine year old girl had been killed. The missionary was being held by the police in jail. My blood ran cold knowing of the Albanian tradition, perhaps obligation, of vendetta and that the missionary in jail was ethnic Chinese from Singapore. I hated to think what would happen to a 50 year old female Singaporean missionary held in an Albanian jail. I decided that I needed to go to Korca the next day.

While Korca is only about 100 miles from Tirana, it is a four hour drive. We traveled knowing that there might be a hearing in the case before we could get there. We arrived outside the court and learned that the family had come to court and had not pressed charges. The court hearing had been held, and the missionary had been freed. However, she was still being processed by the police when we arrived. About 30 minutes later, the missionary left the police building to be greeted with tears of joy by her four fellow missionaries working in Korca and the people from her village church.

Now we had the difficult duty to visit the family. What do you say to a family on behalf of the mission community, one member of which drove the car that killed their daughter? I know that I was not elegant or insightful, but I did the best I could. Incredibly, the girl attended the children's group of a local Evangelical church in their village and her brother was a Christian. I can't begin to calculate how remote the possibility is of an Evangelical Christian missionary killing an Evangelical Christian child in a traffic accident, but it had happened. The family lived on the fourth floor of a typically run down communist period apartment house. The people were poor. In the apartment were the girl's father and mother 2 grandmothers and a collection of aunts, uncles and cousins. After Dalia and I had said all that we could think to say to the grieving family, the father spoke to us and said two things. He did not blame the missionary for his daughter's death (the girl had run

right into the road into the path of the missionary's car) and he wanted us to know that the missionary had nothing to fear from his family. There was an inward sigh of relief . . . there would be no vendetta.

We got into the car for the long drive back to Tirana. I could only think of the missionary and the family. For the family, I can't imagine the pain of losing a child in this way I also was overwhelmed with their act of forgiveness. I wonder how many Western well-to-do Christians would have forgiven the driver within two days of the death of their beautiful daughter.

So an incredible two day period closed. I have sat in the apartment of a family speaking on behalf of the Evangelical missionaries of Albania expressing our sorrow for the death of a little girl killed by a missionary. Is this what retirement is supposed to be? Yet, I am glad that God has called me to be here at this time."

As I read Bob's letter, I thought—this is what the Gospel is about: Bob and Dalia's presence—they are parents too—their Christ-like presence with a grieving mother and father, affirming the unity of the human race, of all nationalities and races and religions, standing along side parents mourning the death of their child. That act of grace and forgiveness on the part of an Albanian peasant—extended to a Christian—is a fragile sign of the oneness of the human race.

That reconciliation—that hope—that mystery—is the promise that is given when we break bread and share the cup and remember the one who prayed "that they may all be one that the world may believe."

Amen.